The Talk It Out Solution
How can you promote safety? Try getting rid of the metal detectors.

By Caralee Adams | November/December 2008
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What makes for a safe school? Security guards patrolling the hallways? Metal detectors? Zero-tolerance policies? The answer may be none of the above: Educators are searching for new solutions to achieving harmony in the classroom and, surprisingly, they're increasingly holistic. "There aren't enough bars, metal detectors, or police to make a school safe if there is a culture of violence in a school," says Ted Wachtel, founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. "You need to strike at the heart of the culture."

Trying restorative practices

One safer schools initiative making its way across the nation is the implementation of "restorative practices." Rather than meting out punishments, restorative practices employs a talk-it-out approach to foster dialogue between aggrieved students. Students are taught basic social skills to problem-solve and lower the tension in schools. One premise of the strategy is that kids feel safe when there is cooperation instead of hostility; another is that kids who feel valued and connected at school are less likely to act out. Many administrators around the country are investing in restorative practices programs to build a healthy school climate in hopes of fending off violence and improving academic performance.

Restorative practices places responsibility on the students themselves rather than relying on zero tolerance and authoritarian control from above. It uses a collaborative response to wrongdoing, which is intended to be supportive, not demeaning. While some may feel it's too "touchy-feely," Wachtel maintains that it's effective and its impact is proven.

In 1977, Wachtel and his wife, Susan, both public school teachers, founded the Community Service Foundation, a sister organization to the International Institute for Restorative Practices. Their work evolved into strategies they named restorative practices, a spin-off of the restorative justice movement. But it wasn't until 1999 that the IIRP developed its SaferSanerSchools program that tailored the restorative practices concept to a school setting.

Newtown Middle School in Newtown, Pennsylvania, is one school that adopted the restorative practices model, and it has seen drastic changes in behavior. Over a three-year period, the detention rate dropped 82 percent and suspensions are down 59 percent. Administrators credit the approach with making the school safer by building a sense of community.

"When restorative practices were instituted, we started to have a cultural shift in the way we treated kids and adults. People began to treat each other with a lot of civility," says Richard Hollahan, principal of the affluent suburban school of seventh and eighth graders.

How it works

When a discipline problem arises, all the parties assemble in a circle. They present their sides and work to resolve the issue and restore their relationships. The emphasis is on repairing the harm, rather than punishing the offender—although accountability is part of the process too.

At the core of restorative practices is the belief that people will make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them. People accept decisions more readily if they have input, Wachtel explains.

While punishment may spur a temporary change, a more lasting solution is to help kids see how their actions impact others and how they can learn to control negative impulses, maintains Wachtel. “Kids don’t think of teachers as human beings. When they hear a person was frightened or hurt, they gain some empathy and they are more dramatically affected than by punishment,” he continues. “We have the mistaken notion that the only way to change behavior is to inflict pain and suffering, but that doesn’t work.”

Get the support staff involved

When a school decides to try the restorative practices approach, IIRP suggests training all professional and support staff in a one-day introductory workshop, customizing it to the needs of the school. The goal is to build a culture where kids are less likely to do negative things because they have a relationship with teachers and staff, says Bob Costello, director of training and consulting for IIRP.

Training is recommended for everyone because support staffers often interact with students with very little supervision and not a lot of organizational power, says Costello. It’s important that they buy into the concept for it to become organic in the school, he adds.

The program encourages collective responsibility in which students help create and enforce the rules. The hope is that eventually they will say to one another, “We don’t act like that,” says Costello.

Dramatic results

Restorative practices are being implemented mainly in public secondary schools, prompted by a mandate to improve school safety, says John Baille, training and consulting coordinator for IIRP.

Just a few months into using the program, West Philadelphia High School is seeing results. “We had a lot of issues of violence, fires, kids misbehaving in class, disrespect,” says Russell Gallagher, assistant principal at the low-income, racially diverse urban school. “We want the kids to take ownership. We think restorative practices will do that.”

Since West Philadelphia High adopted restorative practices last spring, suspensions are down 50 percent and recidivism has plummeted, says Gallagher. “You have to give students a voice,” he says. Often the victim in an incident is timid. But when they are given the chance to say, “That hurt me,” it empowers the student and includes accountability for the aggressor.

“What restorative practices does is change the emotional atmosphere of the school,” says Gallagher. “You can stop guns, but you can’t stop them from bringing fists or a poor attitude. A metal detector won’t detect that.”

Help them know one another

But restorative practices isn’t the only social skills–based strategy for increasing school safety.

Geared at grades K-–6, the Responsive Classroom approach emphasizes cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. Developed in 1981 by the Northeast Foundation for Children, a nonprofit organization based in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, the curriculum uses routines and sharing practices to encourage a sense of community in the classroom, says Karen Casto, consulting administrator for the foundation and former principal of Penn Valley Elementary in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

Under the Responsive Classroom model, teachers hold a morning meeting, when they greet students by name and give them a chance to share news. "The point is for children to get to know each other," says Casto. "It's hard to bully other kids when you know them. The whole notion of getting to know each other creates safety and security for the rest of the day."

Kids help create rules to take care of themselves and the classroom. The emphasis is not on limits but on empowerment: making rules that allow kids to achieve their goals. "The children feel it's their classroom," Casto says.

In the Responsive Classroom approach, when problems arise, there are logical consequences that help children learn from their mistakes, says Castro. For example, if a student hurts someone's feelings, rather than inflict an arbitrary punishment, such as revoking recess, a teacher or administrator invites the victim to express his or her feelings to the aggressor and seek a resolution, which might be as simple as an apology or inclusion in a game. "As adults, we often put a punishment mentality on things that really just need fixing," says Casto. After using this approach for a few years at her school, Castro was no longer swamped with behavior issues.

In Castro's experience, there were still suspensions for clear policy violations. Bringing a knife is non-negotiable, for instance. But classroom disruptions, such as laughing when a student makes a mistake, declined as kids learned to work together and assert themselves in respectful ways. (See www.responsiveclassroom.org for materials, including a newsletter, DVD, and new middle school curriculum.)

Teach emotions step-by-step

Another program that emphasizes social skills is Second Step, a violence prevention program for PreK–8 teachers, students, and parents that stresses the importance of emotional and social development along with academics. "It's basically changing students' habits about how they express anger and handle conflict. They are taught how to be kind and empathetic," says Karen Sorenson, safe and healthy schools facilitator in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Empathy is the first skill taught because it provides the motivation for impulse control and problem solving. Students need to care about the impact of their behavior. After identifying another person's feelings and stepping into their perspective, students can respond in an emotionally caring way, calm themselves down, and control their behavior.

Second Step gives kids the tools to follow the rules. "It provides a skill framework for positive peer and teacher relationships and conflict resolution that is necessary for behavior change," says Sorenson. "A school can have the most positive and consistently enforced rule system possible, but unless the children have the skills to follow the rules, it won't be effective in the long term."

In studying L.A. Unified's Kennedy Elementary School, which employs Second Step, Sorenson

saw a significant reduction in physical aggression, referrals, and suspensions. The earlier the program starts, the more effective it is, she says. Many kids who grow up around computers and video games feel isolated and lack the human interaction needed to develop empathy and other social skills, says Sorenson. Learning to make positive relationships can be the foundation to building a safe school.

Second Step was created in 1979 by the Committee for Children, a Seattle nonprofit, and was revised most recently in 2003. It is used in 25,000 schools in 21 countries and has received several honors, including a top rating from the U.S. Department of Education.

Maureen Blum, principal at St. Benedict School (K–8) in Seattle, has used the Second Step program at three schools in the past 18 years. “It empowers the kids to take the steps to problem-solve,” she says. “It’s logical, simple, and easy for teachers to teach.”

For instance, when there is an issue of name calling, the kids involved fill out a problem-solving sheet. They write who is involved, their part, possible solutions, and how others might feel. Often they realize that it was just a misunderstanding or someone was in a bad mood.

“It doesn’t get rid of the problem, but it keeps things from growing bigger than they need to be. Problems get resolved at a lower level and there is less anxiety for the kids,” says Blum. Issues are settled before the point of physical violence. Clear expectations are relayed to students and parents, which also keeps problems from escalating. Says Blum, “It makes it safe for the whole community.”